

Amendments to the Claims:

This listing of claims will replace all prior versions, and listings of claims in the application:

Listing of Claims:

1. (Currently amended) A computerized method for processing a transaction conducted by a customer presenting a private label card, wherein the private label card is issued by one of a merchant and a merchant consortium that includes the merchant, wherein the private label card is used as a form of payment accepted for transactions only at the merchant or merchant consortium, wherein the private label card is associated with an account against which transactions may be conducted, and wherein the account is identified by a private label card account identifier during a transaction, the method comprising:

receiving, at a payment network having a processor, and in response to a transaction being conducted using a private label card at a merchant, a first information packet from the merchant, the first information packet including a cost of ~~a financial~~ the transaction between the merchant and a customer and a private label card account identifier for the account associated with the private label card presented by the customer as a payment for the ~~financial~~ transaction;

using the private label card account identifier to determine, with the processor in the payment network, account information that identifies a separate financial account of the customer maintained ~~by the customer~~ at a financial institution that is separate from the merchant and merchant consortium that issued the private label card and that identifies authorization information that allows debit access to the identified financial account at the separate financial institution;

generating, at the processor in the payment network, a second information packet comprising the transaction cost information, the account information, and the authorization information; and

transmitting, from the payment network, the second information packet to the financial institution with a request to perform a debit transaction from the identified financial

account for the cost of the ~~financial~~ transaction, so that the cost of ~~the~~ transaction conducted against the account of the private label card is authorized and paid by the separate financial institution based on a debit transaction against the separate financial account.

2. (Original) The method of claim 1, further comprising:
receiving, at the payment network, a response from the financial institution indicating approval or denial of the debit transaction; and
transmitting, from the payment network, an authorization code to the merchant indicating approval or denial of the financial transaction in accordance with the response received from the financial institution.

3. (Original) The method of claim 2, further comprising:
performing, with the payment network, a risk analysis of the financial transaction;
and
determining, with the payment network, whether to provide a guarantee of the financial transaction to the merchant based on the risk analysis,
wherein the authorization code further reflects whether the guarantee is provided.

4. (Original) The method of claim 1, wherein the first information packet further includes a credential received from the customer, the method further comprising determining, with the payment network, that the credential is associated with the private label card account identifier.

5. (Original) The method of claim 1, wherein:
the account information comprises a primary account number for the identified financial account; and
the authorization information comprises a personal identification number assigned to the customer for accessing the identified financial account.

6. (Original) The method of claim 1 wherein the second information packet is transmitted to the financial institution over an automated clearing house ("ACH") network.

7. (Original) The method of claim 1 wherein the second information packet is transmitted to the financial institution over a debit system.

8. (Original) The method of claim 1 wherein the second information packet is transmitted directly to the financial institution from the payment network.

9. (Original) The method of claim 1 further comprising crediting, with the payment network, a loyalty program for the customer in response to execution of the financial transaction.

10. (Withdrawn) A computerized method comprising:
receiving, from a merchant, account information that identifies a financial account maintained by a customer at a financial institution and authorization information that allows debit access to the identified financial account;
verifying, through a payment network, the account information and authorization information;
associating an account identifier for a private label card to the customer account information and authorization information, the private label card being a form of payment issued on behalf of one of the merchant and a merchant consortium that includes the merchant, the merchant and merchant consortium being separate from the financial institution at which the financial account is maintained;
transmitting, from the payment network, an enrollment approval for the customer to the merchant.

11. (Withdrawn) The method of claim 10, wherein verifying the account information and authorization information comprises:
transmitting, from the payment network, the account information and authorization information to the financial institution with a request to authenticate the information;

receiving, at the payment network, a response from the financial institution authenticating the information.

12. (Withdrawn) The method of claim 10, further comprising:
before associating the account identifier, receiving, from the merchant, a stock card number; and
wherein associating the account identifier comprises using the stock card number for the account identifier.

13. (Withdrawn) The method of claim 12, further comprising, before associating the stock card number, validating, with the payment network, that the stock card number is registered to the merchant.

14. (Withdrawn) The method of claim 12, further comprising before associating the stock card number, verifying, with the payment network, the stock card number has not been previously associated with a different customer account identifier.

15. (Withdrawn) The method of claim 10, further comprising:
before associating the card number, receiving, from the merchant, a customer private label account identifier for a private label card previously issued to the customer; and
wherein associating the card number comprising using the customer private label account identifier for the account identifier.

16. (Withdrawn) The method of claim 10, wherein associating the card number comprises generating, with the payment network, a unique card number for the private label card.

17. (Withdrawn) The method of claim 10, wherein receiving account information from the merchant comprises receiving information read, using a magnetic stripe reader, from an instrument presented by the customer.

18. (Withdrawn) The method of claim 10, wherein receiving account information from the merchant comprises receiving information read, using a magnetic information character recognition (MICR) reader, from a MICR line, of a check presented by the customer

19. (Currently amended) A payment network for processing a transaction conducted by a customer presenting a private label card, wherein the private label card is issued by one of a merchant and a merchant consortium that includes the merchant, wherein the private label card is used as a form of payment accepted for transactions only at the merchant or merchant consortium, wherein the private label card is associated with an account against which transactions may be conducted, and wherein the account is identified by a private label card account identifier during a transaction, the ~~method~~ network comprising:

a communications device;

a processor;

a storage device; and

a memory coupled with the processor, the memory comprising a computer-readable medium having a computer-readable program embodied therein for directing operation of the payment network, the computer-readable program including:

instructions for receiving, with the communications device, a first information packet from a merchant, the first information packet including a cost of ~~a financial~~ the transaction between the merchant and a customer and a private label card account identifier that represents a private label card account and that is presented by the customer as a payment for the financial transaction;

instructions for determining from the private label card account identifier, with the processor, account information that identifies a separate financial account of the customer maintained ~~by the customer~~ at a financial institution separate from the merchant and merchant consortium that issued the private label card and that identifies authorization information that allows debit access to the identified financial account at the separate financial institution;

instructions for generating, with the processor, a second information packet comprising the transaction cost information, the account information, and the authorization information; and

instructions for transmitting, with the communications device, the second information packet to the financial institution with a request to perform a debit transaction from the identified financial account for the cost of the ~~financial~~ transaction between the merchant and customer using the private label card.

20. (Original) The payment network of claim 19 wherein the computer-readable program further includes:

instructions for receiving, with the communications device, a response from the financial institution indicating approval or denial of the debit transaction; and

instructions for transmitting, with the communications device, an authorization code to the merchant indicating approval or denial of the financial transaction in accordance with the response received from the financial institution.

21. (Original) The payment network of claim 20 wherein the computer-readable program further includes:

instructions for performing, with the processor, a risk analysis of the financial transaction; and

instructions for determining, with the processor, whether to provide a guarantee of the financial transaction to the merchant based on the risk analysis,

wherein the authorization code further reflects whether the guarantee is provided.

22. (Original) The payment network of claim 19 wherein:

the communications system is coupled with an automated clearing house ("ACH") network; and

the instructions for transmitting the second information packet to the financial institution comprise instructions for transmitting the second information packet over the ACH network.

23. (Original) The payment network of claim 19 wherein the instructions for transmitting the second information packet to the financial institution comprise instructions for transmitting the second information packet over a debit system.

24. (Original) The payment network of claim 19 wherein the instructions for transmitting the second information packet comprise instructions for transmitting the second information packet directly to the financial institution from the communications device.

25. (Original) The payment network of claim 19 wherein:
the account information comprises a primary account number ("PAN") for the identified financial account; and
the authorization information comprises a personal identification number ("PIN") assigned to the customer for accessing the identified financial account.

26. (Original) The payment network of claim 19 wherein the computer-readable program further comprises instructions for crediting, with the processor, a loyalty program for the customer in response to execution of the financial transaction.

27. (Withdrawn) A payment network comprising:
a communications device;
a processor;
a storage device; and
a memory coupled with the processor, the memory comprising a computer-readable medium having a computer-readable program embodied therein for directing operation of the payment network, the computer-readable program including:
instructions for receiving, from a merchant, account information that identifies a financial account maintained by a customer at a financial institution and authorization information that allows debit access to the identified financial account, wherein the financial institution is separate from the merchant and any merchant consortium that includes the merchant;

instructions for verifying, with the processor, the account information and authorization information; and

instructions for associating, with the processor, a card number identifying a private label card account to the customer account information and authorization information, the private label card being a form of payment issued on behalf of one of the merchant and a merchant consortium that includes the merchant, the merchant and merchant consortium being separate from the financial institution; and

instructions for transmitting to the merchant, with the communications device, an enrollment approval for the customer.

28. (Withdrawn) The payment network of claim 27, wherein the instructions for verifying the account information and authorization information comprise:

instructions for transmitting, with the communications device, account information and authorization information to the financial institution with a request to authenticate the information;

instructions for receiving, with the communications device, a response from the financial institution authenticating the information.

29. (Withdrawn) The payment network of claim 27, wherein the computer-readable program further comprises:

instructions for receiving from the merchant, with the communications device, a stock card number; and

wherein the instructions for associating the card number comprise instructions for using the stock card number for the account identifier.

30. (Withdrawn) The payment network of claim 29, wherein the computer-readable program further comprises instructions for validating, with the processor, the stock card number is registered to the merchant.

31. (Withdrawn) The payment network of claim 29, wherein the computer-readable program further comprises instructions for verifying, with the processor, the stock card number has not been previously associated with a different customer.

32. (Withdrawn) The payment network of claim 27, wherein the computer-readable program further comprises:

instructions for receiving from the merchant, with the communications device, a customer private label account identifier for a private label card previously issued to the customer; and

wherein the instructions for associating the card number comprise instructions for using the customer private label account identifier for the account identifier.

33. (Withdrawn) The payment network of claim 29, wherein the computer-readable program further includes instructions for generating, with the processor, a unique card number for the private label card.

34. (New) The method of claim 1, wherein the separate financial account of the customer maintained at the financial institution is a demand deposit account.

35. (New) The method of claim 1, wherein more than one separate financial account is identified using the private label account identifier, and wherein the debit transaction is allocated among the identified financial accounts.